

Keynote One
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Building Essential Bridges to Human Dignity
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Abstract

There are significant changes in the ways in which foreign aid and international development are currently being framed in the United States and (quite differently) in Canada. The rhetoric of a feminist foreign policy in Canada is refreshing, although the money has yet to follow the words. On my side of the border, the unfolding implications of an “America First” foreign policy is deeply concerning, in that it consistently defaults to self-interested political economy thinking and the prioritized short-term achievement of security and trade maximizing results. In such a context, where is the cosmopolitan discourse that is so central to international development – that of universal moral values and the recognition of human dignity?

This paper briefly explores the competing notions of how human dignity is being articulated by two leading thinkers, the relevance of human dignity and human rights to international development, and how “dignity” remains at best a rhetorical flourish among government policy makers. As a development practitioner, researcher, former government official (under Obama), and academic, I note the nearly complete absence of any structured deliberative spaces for secular moral discourse within our institutions of international development, diplomacy, and foreign assistance, effectively meaning that we have no regular strategic processes by which we can give thought to the ethical implications of commitments to human dignity – and what that absence implies for the future.

Finally, I challenge the reader to use the emerging discourse on human dignity as a means through which to proactively bridge between the many role players and stakeholders within the highly fragmented international development, advocacy, research, policy and humanitarian assistance communities to build a coalition to articulate, assert, defend, and promote the premise of universal human dignity.

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From the inside, the Obama administration's combination of optimism and idealism was intoxicating. Still, almost from the outset there were signs that certain changes were overly ambitious and ultimately unrealistic. Federal bureaucracies have their own inertia – even if intentionally prodded along by ideologically-driven liberal political appointees such as I. Fortunately, my particular assignment on the Obama roster placed me in an advantageous position from which to advocate for moral and ethical principles which I hold dear. And despite being the sole political appointee on the Policy Task Team at the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the eight other senior and seasoned permanent USAID staffers respected me as an experienced development practitioner with nearly two decades of overseas work in the Global South under my belt – much of that implementing USAID-funded projects. After a year of working closely together, we had cohered as a team, even if we often came at the issues quite differently.

Our task, and the reason for the convening of this particular Policy Task Team, was to draft a new Agency-wide strategy document that would guide all USAID programs and budgets in more than fifty countries around the world. Our topics were democracy, human rights, and governance (or “DRG”), and our new strategy was to replace USAID's existing but sorely outdated strategy (more than two decades old) with a comprehensive rethink and update. The old strategy was known across USAID as the democracy and governance (or “DG”) strategy, and the specialists who oversaw its implementation globally were called DG Officers.

They still are.

That's significant, given that the “new” strategy was finalized five years ago – ample time for human rights awareness to have percolated into an institutional change of acronym.

Superficially, human rights held an important place in the strategy; number three of its four

strategic objectives was to “protect and promote universally recognized human rights”. That emphasis on human rights was where I had come in; I had led the drafting of that part of the new strategy, and among its intended consequences within the larger scope of our efforts was the elevation of human rights across all USAID programming.

The addition of the “R” in the “DG” acronym may seem insignificant to those on the outside, but for those development practitioners and decision-makers within USAID the “DG” label was entrenched in the institutional culture. Not only would it be a challenge to persuade USAID that projects ought to raise awareness, prevent abuses, and promote human rights – we also had to shift an institution’s way of thinking about itself and about the meaning and importance of human rights.

It was only one letter. Still, adding the “R” was ambitious.

The world’s largest international development institution had long conceived of “human rights” much more from a diplomat’s perspective instead of through a development lens. To most within USAID, human rights exist as a body of laws that are generally ignored by developing countries, and flagrantly trampled by autocrats and dictators everywhere. USAID already had a long and proud programming legacy of empowering local civil society activists to safely investigate and accurately catalog human rights abuses, with the expectation that at some undefined point in time the abusers would be brought to justice. When and how that might happen were seldom addressed, other than by means of general references to transitional justice, but to me there were even deeper concerns. Up until that point USAID had viewed human rights only as laws that were frequently transgressed; I was advocating for the addition of a moral conception of human rights based on a stated – albeit rhetorical – U.S. government commitment to universal human dignity.¹

¹ Illustrative of such statements of commitment, in November 2016 the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Geneva issued a very explicit statement titled “Human Rights Commitments and Pledges of the United States of America”. This statement remains posted on their website as of May 27, 2018. See <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2016/02/24/human-rights-commitments-and-pledges-of-the-united-states-of-america/>

In truth, in 2013 I was even more ambitious; as an emboldened senior political appointee placed at USAID but ultimately answerable to the White House, I used my bully pulpit to strongly assert that human rights laws ought to be seen to rest upon a moral and ethical foundation of international human rights, which in turn ought to depend on a robust commitment to universal human dignity. Simplistically stated, I was intent upon getting the “R” into the “DG” acronym, but my actual goal was the opening up of a comprehensive space within USAID for moral and ethical deliberation to occur. Such an institutional space is notable by its complete absence at USAID and to my knowledge elsewhere within the U.S. government; the last example I ever experienced of such a space was the venerable Friday Morning “Values in Development” group at the World Bank. Spanning more than two decades, Bank staff, consultants, and guests had met for an hour over coffee and breakfast every Friday at 8:30am. It was laid down five years ago, when young people at the Bank no longer showed any interest in such early morning deliberations. I miss it still.

My emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects of human rights and human dignity garnered some traction at USAID within that Policy Task Team, and early in 2013 the Team submitted the penultimate draft of the new DRG Strategy to the Administrator of USAID for a final review. If past precedent meant anything, this would be a mere formality – Policy Task Teams typically are staffed by USAID’s best and brightest and they consequently enjoy considerable autonomy within the Agency. We had already engaged, frequently and in detail, with the USAID Administrator and other USAID staff at all levels of seniority during the long process of drafting this strategy. Nevertheless, when the Administrator returned to us the marked-up version of what was to become the new strategy, the only significant change he had incorporated was to strike out all of the language that referred to USAID as a promoter of human rights. And while not explicitly stated by him, it was noteworthy that he had also deleted any language that aligned too closely with the principles typical of human rights-based development approaches. Such approaches were then gaining considerable attention among other bilateral and multilateral development and donor agencies, but USAID had yet to even engage in this debate, much less

adopt any of its principles². Without delving into that discourse, the Administrator explained that the institutionally imposed thirty-page limit to any USAID strategy document would not allow him to add some paragraphs on the cutting-edge technologies that he was particularly keen to include. There needed to be a tradeoff; human rights promotion had to go.

Even though the final strategy still retained the official designation as the “DRG Strategy”³, USAID employees never really had to make the change away from the old acronym and the old way of thinking. It remains a “DG” institutional space within USAID, and while “human rights” does have some rhetorical traction within the relatively thin moral and ethical discourse at USAID, in practical and programming terms it remains almost entirely an exercise in cataloging abuses of international human rights law, with a particular (and frequently exclusive) focus on civil and political rights.

On June 9th, 2017, Canada took its own ambitious moral initiative in support of universal human dignity, with the declaration of a Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP)⁴. This bold gesture acknowledged the inherent inequalities that are a direct byproduct of patriarchal cultures – inequalities often made most manifest in prevailing social structures that define gender roles and prerogatives such that women’s bodies, opportunities, freedoms, rights, and choices are subject to men’s authority. The FIAP wisely notes that human nature is complex, and that many factors such as gender or race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, age or talent, and many others, act on their own and in combination with other such identity factors, intersecting to shape who we are and what agency, opportunity, and freedom each of us enjoys (or ought to).

Of particular interest to me, FIAP’s Action Area 2 specifically targets human dignity. On the face of it, that’s provocative – there isn’t even a consensus on how Canada – or any country - defines human dignity. That lack of definitive terminology is not as problematic as might be

² To the best of my knowledge, USAID still has yet to seriously consider human rights-based approaches to development, other than commissioning one desk study by an outside consultant.

³ <https://www.usaid.gov/democracy-human-rights-and-governance-strategy>

⁴ http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng

presumed; there is an enormous overlap among cultures and societies in their intuitive and anecdotal descriptions of what dignity means to them, and why it is so universally important. Dignity matters to everyone. Unfortunately, the FIAP goes on to limit its definition of human dignity to a relatively small if important universe of considerations: (1) access to essential services including health care, sexual and reproductive care, potable water, nutritious food and quality education, and (2) humanitarian assistance to populations made vulnerable due to the devastating impact of armed conflict or natural catastrophe. The deeper moral and existential relevance to humanity of a universal notion of human dignity – and our moral obligations to recognize, respect, and respond to the presence of such dignity, is left unaddressed.

Canada's new feminist policy not only fails to offer a definition and moral grounding of human dignity, but it also doesn't bother to define feminism. We do know that feminism is not synonymous with human dignity, but it is generally held that the application of a feminist lens to international relief and development would in practice align quite tightly with human rights-based approaches to international assistance. Human rights thinking depends heavily on the premise of human exceptionalism as captured by human dignity, and both human rights and feminist frameworks recognize and respect universalism and core moral and existential value in a person's identity and existence as a human being, possessing the capacity to reason. Both frameworks place human rights-holders (and their needs) at the center, and both frameworks emphasize demand-driven foreign assistance. Also, they are both profoundly radical assertions: were either feminism or more robust (i.e. not merely rhetorical) interpretations of human dignity to be realized at scale, with adequate resources and with unflinching political will, the resulting transformation of the status quo would be unlike anything ever experienced in human history.

While the FIAP has attracted a great deal of attention and support in principle, the new policy does lack robust coherence as an implementable development policy. There is also the unfortunate problem of money – there simply isn't anything remotely approaching adequate funding to make the FIAP anything more than an tantalizing (if, to some, daunting) notion. Feminists reformers long ago learned that to gauge the seriousness and sincerity of any effort to stand up for the universal human dignity, equality, equity, and human rights of women or any

marginalized group, one first has to follow the money. Canada has yet to allocate that money at the requisite levels, let alone to follow its distribution and results.

It is unfair to assume that USAID and Global Affairs Canada are simply not engaged in exploring the intellectual underpinnings of development. Both nations view their aid programs from the prevailing perspective of political economy principles – power and money. For women, girls, and marginalized groups, however, that political economy playing field is anything but level; marginalized groups (which also includes that half of humanity who are female) are largely off the field entirely, or their contributions are ignored. There is little if any space within political economy theorizing to deliberate the morality and values of development; it is assumed that we are each intent upon maximizing our self-interest, and that government’s role is to incentivize preferred behaviors. Where is the room for human rights or human dignity, for altruism, compassion, or secular morality in that discourse?

The foreign assistance discourse is particularly fraught now in Trump’s America. Among the current cohort of Republican political decision-makers in the United States, we have even lost the fairly thin presumption that foreign aid represents the compassion and care of the American people and America’s commitment to respecting the human rights of those in poverty and distress in the Global South⁵. In the era of “America First” and amid the political bluster, crudeness, bombast, and nativist machinations of President Trump and his supporters, foreign aid is only tolerated to the extent that it explicitly serves America’s security and trade interests. Sadly, Trump’s influence is not limited to the United States; as Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch has noted “Western democracies that were once reliable defenders of human rights have been consumed by a nativist backlash, leaving an open field for dictators and demagogues” (Roth 2018). Do not expect a genuine commitment to human dignity among that cast.

⁵ Recent polls however do indicate that a robust majority of Americans still support an engaged U.S. role in the world, a moral dimension to U.S. foreign policy, and the giving of foreign aid, especially humanitarian aid. “American public support for foreign aid in the age of Trump”, Steven Kull, July 31, 2017, <https://www.google.com/search?q=Trump%2C+human+rights%2C+foreign+aid&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-1>

Earlier in this paper I noted that an intuitive appreciation of human dignity is widespread. In formal policy discourse however, it remains undefined as a term. That doesn't mean that we haven't been thinking about dignity, but we do have to endure the cacophony of not all being on the same page when we are having the dignity discussion. For some of us, dignity can be interpreted thinly as a person's status, demeanor, or rank. Alternatively, it can be linked to the roles which one fulfills (or fails to fulfill). For others, dignity is complicated, mysterious, even ineffable, yet inherent to the human condition and equally present within us all. One of the leading contemporary thinkers about universal human dignity is the emeritus professor of politics at Princeton University (or, as he prefers to self-identify, the "oncologist of politics"⁶) George Kateb. Professor Kateb distinguishes existential values from moral values, defining the latter as having to do solely or principally with human suffering. His argument is that being made to suffer, physically or materially, is not conceptually the same wrong as being treated as if one is not human. In his view, which I support, we must first begin by laying claim to humanity – captured in the concept of universal human dignity – as a condition worthy of respect. Only then we can move on to address suffering.

George Kateb views dignity as exceptionally valuable; so much so that he considers that the label of "immorality" – as strongly negative as that condition is - just isn't strong enough to capture the sense of "evil in the form of the effacement of human dignity" (Kateb 2011, pp. 13, 39). This doesn't mean that Kateb is unconcerned about the immorality of human suffering. After all, intense or sustained suffering constitutes an egregious assault on human dignity, sometimes to such an intensity that the very possibility of the idea of human dignity is forced out of the mind of the suffering victim. Suffering matters, especially in the context of international development and humanitarian assistance, but our existence as dignified human beings matters more. You would not be able to discern this from America's foreign assistance policies and practices, but Canada's focus on a feminist agenda does bring us much closer – at least potentially.

⁶ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/28/an-interview-with-george-kateb/>

Kateb takes the position that human dignity exists universally. Since it is the inherent birthright of each and every human being, it therefore ought to be recognized and respected instead of ignored or assaulted. A different view is asserted by the contemporary German philosopher Arnd Pollmann, who interprets human dignity as a fragile *potential* capability to lead a truly human life – a potential that has to be fulfilled and self-actualized by the persons in question, even if occasionally enduring the precarious life conditions that we commonly encounter in our work in international development (Pollmann 2010, pp. 243, 245). Pollmann distances himself from Kateb by claiming that not all human beings already possess the same dignity. He tempers that provocative statement by quickly arguing that all human beings have exactly the same rights to the protection of their dignity – be it “potential” or robustly realized.

Given the very different implications between “possessing” and “protecting” universal human dignity and dignity-potential, the Kateb-Pollmann debate is theoretically important, and it has equally important programmatic implications for development theorists, scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners. Recognizing that this debate is happening in the absence of any credible effort among the major bilateral and multilateral aid agencies to respect such possession or protect such vulnerable potential however makes it something of a sideshow. Governments everywhere may regularly employ the rhetoric of universal human dignity, but no government has made any significant commitment to this central existential principle of humanity other than the important feminist principles that have been adopted – if not yet fully implemented – by Canada and Sweden⁷. While not directly targeting respect for human dignity as the ultimate goal of foreign aid and development, acknowledging the inherent equality of all genders is a powerful start. It is my fervent hope that this commitment by these two governments will generate a robust deliberative process about human dignity – and I will know that this is occurring when I see Canada refocus FIAP’s Action Area 2 to embrace a far more expansive, more explicitly moral understanding of the centrality and meaning of human dignity to all efforts to pursue quality, inclusion, empowerment, agency, freedom, and meaning in life.

⁷ <https://www.government.se/government-policy/feminist-foreign-policy/>

As an American citizen, I will need to bide my time while looking for any effective ways to advocate for protecting whatever remains of the Obama/Clinton/Kerry legacy in foreign assistance. That's a rearguard and fairly desperate undertaking, as so many of these earlier American efforts at international development tied to cosmopolitan and caring principles are now threatened with repudiation and abandonment. The work that my colleagues and I did both inside USAID and among the larger development community to embrace and celebrate diversity⁸, respect the development priorities of intended aid beneficiaries, build gender equality and equity, support sexual and gender minorities, reach out to indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities, and view "development" as a long-term cosmopolitan effort in expanding freedoms and capabilities is now facing a very questionable future.

The current President of the United States is committed to a nativist, nationalist, and isolationist direction for my country. He wants to build walls where those before him advocated bridge-building. Globalization has made the world far smaller and more interdependent and helped us to connect with those far away, but the essential bridge-building associated with a cosmopolitan, universal notion of human dignity has yet to be undertaken. Too many "walls" and deep divisions continue to exist between those who accept at least the principle of universal human dignity as relevant and important, and those who consider such notions as frivolous and hopelessly idealistic. Consequently, there are few expectations anywhere that respect for universal human dignity will soon become a recognized threshold of essential human development objectives globally – and that low opinion of the functional value of dignity exists without benefit of any discernible deliberations taking place on this important topic among key decision-makers.

Even within the international assistance community, we lack a common moral foundation. We are functionally fragmented between human rights advocates, researchers and scholars, development practitioners, policy specialists, evaluators, humanitarian relief specialists, conflict mitigation and security specialists, trade experts and negotiators, military interests, the government donor institutions, the philanthropic foundation donor community, the multilateral

⁸ See for example the LGBT Vision for Action, which was as far as my colleagues and I could advance a policy discourse on gender identity and sexual orientation:
<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1874/LGBT%20Vision.pdf>

(global and regional) development banks, the for-profit and the non-profit sectors, academia, and yes – the development ethics community. Poignantly, there exists no common commitment that we could build solidarity upon among these many actors; our unwillingness to promote, defend, and raise awareness about universal human dignity and the human rights infrastructure that springs from that foundation is lacking. At this time of fragmentation and isolationism, that absence is barely noticed.

I believe that the time has come to build a strong coalition to defend and promote the universal premise of human dignity, especially in our efforts in foreign assistance. The challenge isn't so much that the topic lacks sufficient rigor or consensus, but instead that the decision-makers within foreign assistance policy and practice have little to no exposure to deliberative processes anchored in moral and ethical exploration and justification⁹. Until those in power demonstrate transformational standards of ethical leadership, and until citizens everywhere demand moral accountability from such leaders, the urgent discourse on universal human dignity remains only a dream.

References

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⁹ Aid organizations almost never employ or contract people because of their highly developed skills in ethics and philosophy.